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A  
**LETTER**

TO THE

**MEMBERS of the SOCIETY, &c.**

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R E T R I



Academies. - London. - Society etc

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# LETTER

TO THE

## MEMBERS of the SOCIETY

For the ENCOURAGEMENT

OF

ARTS, MANUFACTURES, and COMMERCE:

CONTAINING,

Some REMARKS on the PICTURES

To which the PREMIUMS were adjudged;

WITH SOME

CURSORY OBSERVATIONS

ON

HISTORY PAINTING.

— When shall we behold  
— The Promothéan Hand  
Aspire to ancient Praise? — PLEAS. OF IMAG.

— Pictoribus atque Poetis  
Quidlibet audendi semper fuit æqua potestas.  
Hor. de Art. Poet.

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# LETTERS

MEMBERS of the  
SOCIETY FOR THE  
ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE

THE HISTORY OF  
THE BRITISH MUSEUM

BY JAMES GALT

IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOLUME I. HISTORY OF THE  
BRITISH MUSEUM

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IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOLUME II. HISTORY OF THE  
BRITISH MUSEUM

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VOLUME III. HISTORY OF THE  
BRITISH MUSEUM

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IN FIVE VOLUMES

VOLUME IV. HISTORY OF THE  
BRITISH MUSEUM



A

## LETTER, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

HAVE never had the  
I honor to speak in your  
numerous assembly, nor  
perhaps ever shall. The many  
able gentlemen who preside over  
each department, are possest of  
such abilities, and exert their *ora-*  
*torical talents*, in so unwearied a  
manner in the public cause, that  
they make all attempts of an indi-

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vidual unnecessary, and seal the lips of many with a *becoming* silence.

But when I consider gentlemen thus engaged with alacrity, and diligence, in so laudible, and important an effort, and undertaking, of calling forth *genius*, and raising the *politer arts* from their low state, and depressed condition; I almost fear any address will be esteemed unimportant, and unnecessary.

I am, notwithstanding this and many other considerations to the contrary, emboldened to presume upon

upon an hour, which is not immediately devoted to this important business over which you preside ; to *throw out* (as is the usual phrase of popular assemblies) some cursory, and unconnected hints relative to the *judgment* past upon, and *premiums* allotted to, those *very few* productions of artists, which to evince the *impartiality*, and *caution* with which the society proceeds, were the subject of two succeeding committees.

There can be but little doubt in any one's mind, upon the most superficial glance of each picture,

but that the piece to which the general voice of the society adjudged the premium of *one hundred guineas*, was by many degrees superior in its composition, colouring, and elegance, to any other piece which adorned the room. I am speaking of the historic pieces.

But give me leave to ask, free I can assure you on the one hand from any the least influence of partiality, and uncorrupted with any mean design of supporting any artist who has not deserved well in the estimation of your society ; and on the other, scorning the little arts of depressing a genius of rising reputation. Give  
me

me leave to ask, whether the beautiful colouring of one, the amiable style of the artist, did not prevent the *little merit* (whatever that may be) which the other could boast, from being discerned? I am afraid that while one by the *comparison* was thought *most excellent*; the other was judged a much *inferior* performance than it really was. I do not think it by any means a good piece: it fails in almost every part of design: its colouring is coarse and hard, the drawing inelegant and stiff, and the artist in some points of his piece, bestowing almost more than *Dutch labour*, has left other parts unfinished, and

rude. This is the general idea I have formed of this piece. And these I think are the chief and indeed capital faults of it.

But it seems, *these* were not the faults of that *elegant* criticism, which was *twice* passed by one gentleman, whose reputation for oratory has gained but little by the delivery of this his *peculiar* taste. But yet that learned, and much admired orator, has at least furnished the world with a principle, which should seem most flagrantly to contradict, and oppose another of *general* reception, that oratory, poetry, and painting, sister arts, have a necessary and in-

indissoluble connection and relation.

I must profess myself here, notwithstanding the *authority* of this gentleman's character, a disciple of the antient school \*. I can no more conceive of *these* being separated, than the *graces* themselves.

But to the *spirit* of the criticism : and in this, we have *wit* to charm us into a sympathy with the orator's opinion. Claudius wants dignity ; the queen is in pain ; the

\* Omnes artes, quæ ad humanitatem pertinent, habent quoddam commune vinculum, et quasi cognatione inter se continentur.

Cic. pro Archia Poëta.

sturdy Briton Caractacus (for whose character, drawn in all the charms of descriptive poetry, see Mr. Mason's elegant performance) is *wittily* supposed by the gentleman to have been so struck at the *dignity*, and august *appearance* of royalty, as to loose his centre of gravity; which will well account for the hero's *re-clining* against a pillar, and at once takes off the blame of an *idle posture*. The indignant Briton had some merit in this gentleman's opinion.

I remember once, (to speak *ad officium hominis*, if there be any such license allowed by orators, and

and this gentleman will be so good as to correct me if there is not) that after a long dispute in *divinity* between two of the sacred order, one of the gentlemen rested the whole proof of his point upon one single text, he produced it: it was to the purpose; but his opponent after a little recollection, proclaimed it was *apocryphal*.

Now, if the noble Briton does *really* recline against a pillar, it must be confessed that the posture neither becomes his character, nor the presence in which he appears.

But

But let the gentleman consider, that by the laws of perspective, (which, by the way, in this piece are not ill preserved) that the *nearness* of any two objects, can only be represented by a more remote disposition or nearer conjunction of their *base*. In order then for such a support to our hero, the base of the pillar should have appeared at, or very near his feet. There is no such appearance. Beside, if the hero does lean as described, the pillar of the palace (which is no very small one) must have stood just *before* the throne of the emperor; and if this be *architecture* becoming the dignity of the place,

or

or which any man in his senses could conceive of, let the learned in that art determine.

But I beg pardon for repeating this *imperfect* criticism.—I pass on to the preferable piece ; upon which there was a remark made of the *too placid* countenance of the queen, its *inanity*, and want of expression. I know not what might have been expected from the *painter* ; but I know what I should have expected in the *woman* ; a smile of the most artful assuming ; a look of the most *courteous* respect, which *malignity* itself can put on,

to

to cover the workings and designs  
of wickedness.

The gentleman who made the remark, that *bide* but the *assassin*, and the story is untold, has hit upon the *very spirit* of the piece itself. It was not designed that a discovery should be made ; and therefore most naturally, and carefully avoided by any previous circumstances, till the assassin had perpetrated his horrid business. And therefore I must beg leave to differ from some gentlemen in this respect ; and think, that so far as the *concealment* of the design was necessary in the *history*

*history itself*, that just so far has the artist shewn his excellence in the execution.

By choosing this point of time in the story, the painter has shewn that he has not *mistaken* his own genius and abilities. His pencil is gentle, his expression soft, the turn of his figures amiable, and elegant, perhaps they may be esteemed too studied and forced, for the *freedom* necessary in an history piece : I think they are so, and therefore *define* the excellences of our artist's performance, and genius.. I will venture to pronounce, that  
the

the careful nicety of finishing and colouring which flow from his pencil, will never permit any thing great and distinguishing to mark his pieces. If he should *boldly* venture at a more interesting piece of history, where great characters are to be introduced, and supported, he must choose a point of time, when these are *least* engaged ; which however interesting in itself, if it has greater events preceding, or subsequent, will have but a weak effect upon the imagination ; and instead of leaving it warm and enkindled, will sink it by disappointment into coldness, and reserve.

The

The mind should be carried on beyond its own expectations ; ideas of greatness and novelty should combine to keep it in some agreeable, or interesting suspense, till the *full* force of the piece be felt by the sensation of *the grand passion* excited by the operation of all the *inferior*.

The painter has in some respects the advantage of the historian ; but the latter may be allowed a much colder and less animated style, than the former. Here we cannot feel the passion, but as it is communicated by slow *detail*, and progressive information ; the person, the char-

character, the situation of each, must be described. But these are to affect us at *once* in the representation of the painter. He must strike out a character with a few strokes, and distinguishing excellences, which therefore require to be *strong* and *bold*; and here all the force and spirit of *imagination*, and *judgment*, are to be exercised; that while the *grand* character is preserved, the *subordinate* ones be not lost; but so *combined* and *united*, as to produce the grand effect of one interesting design \*.

\* Raphael has given us the most happy instance of this in Christ's charge to Peter.

It will be necessary therefore, that the painter choose a part of history upon which great events turn, or with which great events are connected; and exclude from his performance *perplexity* of every kind, but what may arise from the passions properly affected. He must carefully avoid any meanness of design, that might leave the mind under a vain conjecture what any part of the piece, even in the subordinate characters, means. *Indeed* as a picture is but as a *point*, or instant in a story, perhaps after all the most judicious election, and care of the artist, the spectator must be left to supply some previous, and

subsequent circumstances, in order to reach the *exact* idea of the painter, and enter *feelingly* into the *spirit* of the piece. It therefore becomes the artist, to choose a subject well known, as well as great, according to that precept of the Roman poet,

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*tuque*  
*Rectius Iliacum carmen deducis in actus,*  
*Quam si proferres ignota indictaque primus.*

Hor. Art. Poet.

And here I cannot help observing, with what propriety gentlemen you have *limited* the historical pieces, confining them to those subjects which *our own* history furnishes us with. Which as they are  
 sup-

supposed to be better known than events which have happened in more remote ages of the world, afford artists the fairest opportunity, upon our present principles, of gaining all that applause which their real merit might claim.

Not but there are subjects of *antiquity*, handed down to us in the most masterly manner of *historic narration*, as well as *poetic energy*; of a nature so great, and interesting, as are by no means to be rejected, from any *other* consideration, but the *inability* of our present artists of reaching the grandeur and sublimity of the ori-

C 2 ginal.

ginal. And therefore when I speak of your judicious limitation, I only speak in reference to the wisdom of suiting the *lesson*, to the *capacity* of the scholar.

If we were to enquire, distinct from all other considerations, whether modern or ancient history (under which last I would include the heathen mythology and divinity) furnish out the greatest ideas, I should at once determine in favour of the latter.

The ancients had in many respects a peculiar advantage over the moderns; and though I can admit

mit of the superiority in their genius, design, composition, and energy, I cannot but suppose that the subjects they attempted, raised their ideas, and conceptions to that noble height, which sometimes lead them to *productions*, the wonder of their own, and all succeeding ages.

I cannot better express my conceptions on this head, than by giving them in the exact words of a very elegant, and ingenious author \* on the subject.

\* Daniel Webb, Esq.

He justly observes, that the ancients had not only their profane history, rich in the most glorious and interesting events; but their sacred, whilst it furnished them with new ideas of the sublime, gave no check to the pathetic. Their *gods*, superior in grace, majesty and beauty, were yet subject to all the feelings and *passions* of *humanity*. How unequal, adds he, is the lot of modern artists? employed by *priests* or princes who *thought* like priests; their subjects are for the most part, taken from a religion which professes at least to *subdue* their passions: their characters are borrowed from the *lowest*

lowest sphere of life : men in whom meanness of birth and simplicity of manners, were the best titles to their election. Even their *divine Master*, is no where in paintings attended with a *great* idea ; his long strait hair, jewish beard, and poor apparel, would *undignify* the most *exalted* nature. Humility and resignation his characteristics, are qualities extreamly edifying and great in a *moral* view, but by no means *picturesque*.

Let us for example compare (we must suppose only as subjects for painting) a Christ armed with a scourge, driving the money chan-

gers out of the temple, to an Alexander, the thunder in his hand, ready to daſt it on the rebellious nations.

Could the painter indeed, by any divine art, give an adequate idea, of that supernatural power by which Christ wrought his miracles, *then* they would bear some resemblance to the *real* dignity of his great character, but this cannot be done; all that lies within the verge of human art is to express the *sensible effects*.

But yet we must allow that some subjects in the history of Christ,

Christ, in *themselves*, and from the general awe, and reverence included in religious subjects, contain some very peculiar circumstances, which may employ the greatest genius of *antiquity* fully to describe. The resuscitation of Lazarus, his own crucifixion, the transfiguration, with their circumstances and characters, afford ample room for the greatest genius to exert all its powers of the richest fancy, and boldest design.

In Raphael's attempt of the latter of these, he has rose to a dignity, and greatness of style with which

which few of his other pieces  
are distinguished.

It is true, as the ingenious author quoted above observes, ‘ that a Christ uplifted by divine energy, dilating in glory, and growing into divinity, is a subject truly sublime;’ and the reason, and only reason in my opinion, why Raphael has not expressed ideas of majesty equal to this subject, is, that human thought could not comprehend, or art imitate the fullest blaze of divinity that ever flamed beneath the heavens. And being lost in the execution of this great design, I own, I can hardly descend

descend to the bottom of the mount, though the various feelings, and sentiments of the disciples are most *lively* expressed, with all the finer, and more delicate movements of the mind, and sentiments of passion, without *feeling* a sensation that necessarily accompanies the *transition* from *divine elevation to humanity.*

But tho' the ancients did excel the modern artists, yet throughout almost all the schools we may meet with examples of the happiest design, the most amiable character, the fairest and softest colouring, the force and energy of composition,

tion, sentiment of passion and expression.

I cannot enter minutely into an examination of these in the short compass a letter prescribes ; a few remarks upon some of the chief may be sufficient. If any desire a general and most concise view, they will be pleased, charmed, and fully rewarded, by reading Mr. Walpole's Introduction to his *Ædes Walpolianæ*.

I will not in this short detail confine myself to the several schools, or exact order of time in which each artist flourished ; I will only

ly speak of them as they chance to rise in my mind, and with that freedom which accompanies the narration of what we immediately recollect.

We have much to charm us, in almost every performance of Carlo Maratti ; he has an *elegance*, and *delicacy*, which never sink into the mean, or minute ; yet there accompanies these a masterly design, and sometimes you will find a *dignity* of character supported, which some of his smaller pieces, would hardly allow you to conceive he would ever arrive at.

There

There is something in the performances of Lanfranc, notwithstanding the refined taste of some virtuosi, that pleases with a charming *variety*, and unconstrained flow of the pencil ; he is sometimes *wild*, and *daring* ; and like a true genius, by a noble adventure, strikes out some happy strokes, full of *freedom*, and *life*.

Salvator Rosa, excels in a *variety*, in which he appears to have much delighted. I know no one artist who could so happily pass from one character to another in that pleasing taste ; and yet sustain each with a beautiful propriety. There is in some  
of

of his pieces a *softness*, and *delicacy* equal to Guido; with excellent *colouring*; and in others an *expression*, and *dignity*, which suit with the strongest sentiment of passion. He seems sensible that he could rise from the *softest* parts of nature, to the *great*, and *sublime*.

Corregio's *studied attitudes*, and *pleasing expression*, his flow of pencil, and *lengthen'd proportions*, with the most *animating tints* that ever adorned canvas, or attracted the eye, give us an idea of the perfection at least of human excellence in figure, and of human art,

art, which in the imitation of this, shews somewhat divine. And tho' he has not in some of his larger pieces, those speaking features of Carlo Maratti; yet he sometimes excells him in the elegant *turn*, and *expression* of the face.

Leonardo da Vinci, has shewn a good *judgment*, joined with a fine *imagination*; he had a perfect knowledge of the *limits* of the passions, and could blend them in as happy a way, and *turn*, as most artists of that famous school. His colouring was excellent, and his skill in the human frame is evident from almost every picture he drew.

If

If to these two excellent artists, you could add the *amiable dignity*, and *softness*, and becoming *majesty* of Parmegiano, with *Titian excellence*, what a piece of perfection would be produced !

But it is the *state* of humanity in almost every situation, employment, and character, that *where* you meet with the greatest excellence, *there* you may expect some peculiar faults. But though no one piece may boast perfection, yet as some approach nearer to this than others, *these* may be said to have *comparative excellence*.

I come now to the celebrated Raphael, a *genius*, if ever there was one; who has shewn a *comprehensive judgment*, a *noble design*, and a great *simplicity* in almost every picture he finished. When engaged in the *sublimeſt* designs, you can always perceive a subordination of his imagination to his judgment: and the fear of *impropriety* of character, has sometimes chastised his pencil into almost a blameable exactness.

This artist threw as much *life* and *spirit* into his pieces, and gave them as much *expression* as it was possible *could* be shewn, considering his manner of colouring was not lively, nor full. The *energies*

gies of passion, while they are always preserved in his pieces never transgress the limits of nature or probability ; they always discover the very *soul* of sentiment. From his too great attention to *this*, was owing the negligence which appears in his draperies, and other appendages of nature.

He always discovers a *majesty* of thought, which distinguishes a mind filled with the *true ideas* of *sublimity*. In his piece of Christ's charge to Peter, we have the happiest instance of all the workings of passion ; and all that *contrast* of character, which form the *harmony* and *perfection* of composition.

Annibal Caracci will furnish us with an instance of *strength* and *force* of drawing ; with beautiful, elegant, and superior colouring : with *proportion* almost the standard by which we may judge of *human excellence*. If Poussin's great expression, were transfused into some of his pieces, they would astonish.— This latter artist has excelled himself in his continence of Scipio ; where all his excellencies combine, and distinguish his admirable *capacity*.

Guido has ever been remarkable for the soft *turn*, *elegance* and

and *air* of his pieces. He generally threw too strong a shade in his contrast, thinking by this to soften his *gayer* tints, of which he has never been lavish, but rather sparing. He could draw beauty even with his outlines. He had a *sweetness* of pencil joined to a *grave*, but *fine imagination*. I cannot be supposed, gentlemen, to offer these faint outlines, as *true* portraits of these great artists: nor this *sketch* of their excellence, as an *adequate idea* of their perfection. Language itself is not sufficiently comprehensive, and bold for this great design. In

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order to form a conception of their performances, we must *study* their works, and *feel* their excellences.

We are so much inferior to them in composition, colouring, character and design, that they ought to be our *originals*, it will be sufficient to copy after them, without going further back in the history of science and art, and forming ideas from the antique.

Besides, but very few of *these* remain, and those that do, our artists may not have an opportunity of studying them; nor if they had, *capacity* in general is wanting to make the *best* use of them; I mean

comparing them with the ancient poets and historians. These, are sometimes the comment, that helps us greatly in the study of this *divine art*; and 'tis to this knowledge we owe such imitations, as carry in them marks of originality too.

Considering the present state of history painting among ourselves, we cannot expect to meet with originals of any value, or excellence. We must be content at first, with *copies* of our best originals: and only expect a piece that will please by the happy *likeness*

it may have to the performances of more able hands.

Though a *servile* imitation in any art, can claim none of that applause which belongs to an original production, yet *copying* after the *best originals*, is the only way to arrive at the character of *originality* itself.

If we enter with *feeling*, and *judgment*, into a piece, sufficient to make our imitation bear a just proportion to the original in those points in which that is supposed to excel, we have then *appropriated* these ideas of perfection, and may diver-

diversify, and combine them as we please, in any composition of *our own.*

But if artists of *inferior* skill, shall attempt an historical piece, which would require the genius and hand of the *greatest* master to design, and execute ; it is not at all to be wondered at, that their productions should be lame and imperfect. Nor can it reasonably be expected, that they should ever arrive at any degree of perfection, from these their most laborious exertions.

Your *present* method, gentlemen, in my *humble opinion*, will never answer

answer your laudable design, of carrying history painting to any degree of perfection. Those artists who are included, or rather include themselves, in the circle of your *premium* society, are such as cannot be supposed equal to any great design, they have shewn hitherto that they are not. Artists of excelling character seem to look upon your society in *this light*, with contempt: from what principle I cannot take upon me to determine; but if it be from the mean fear of being *excelled* by artists, which your proposed premiums may call forth, then are

we

we at a very low ebb of perfection indeed.

But it is not the *character* of our nation to excel in *originality* or *invention*: but yet we are supposed capable of great *improvements*; I should be ready to suppose *this* a truth. Would it not then be an object worthy the intention, and encouragement of your society, to propose the premium for the best *copy* of any original in painting, or any other piece the society might think proper? from hence our present artists may draw such ideas of perfection, as may enable them in some *future time*, to produce ori-

originals worthy the *society* and *themselves*.

I wish I could at once, point out a school, where artists may improve themselves by studying the best pictures; as well as they are enabled by the liberality of a *Duke of Richmond*, to study the best copies of the antique.—

*Thanks, noble Sir, for this generous design, and permission—May such be your honors, and such your achievements, that the politer arts, which are succoured by your aid, and flourish under your patronage, may be worthily employed in bringing their tribute to perpetuate your memory.*

*memory. And as England is not remiss, in bestowing honors upon her heroes, perhaps a characteristic greatness, shall be drawn from your own school, to speak the man whose lowest applause was the generous design, of restoring the politer arts to their original dignity, and excellency.*

It would be a pleasure to *every* gentleman who has cultivated the *least* taste for the polite arts, to see *this* laudable spirit pass into a *precedent*. And it is the more desirable at this *present* time, because if in *this* age, when riches, and science, and all the embellishments of

of human life, are arrived almost at that pitch, that we expect e're long to see them begin to decline, if the *politer arts* keep not equal pace, it will be in vain to expect to see them revive and flourish by *themselves*. Now seems the very period when there is a possibility of attaining to universal character: and when in our national reputation we may attempt to rival *Greece and Rome*.

The institution of the *British Musæum*, must be allowed of very great importance in *this* point of view. It is a grand repository of some of the most curious, and  
valu-

valuable rarities. But I am sorry that noble institution, and fabric stand *alone*; and that we have not a public gallery, furnished with the best performances of the most famous artists.

It surely were no greater difficulty for a *nation* to complete a collection, than *private noblemen*. There are artists who might be well employed, in perfecting this plan by their judicious election; if commissioned, and properly encouraged to leave their native country, and visit a clime where *Vertù* originally sprung up; and has so long flourished.

For

For my own part, though I esteem the *Musæum* as a constitution, without which every other school would not be sufficient to form the general character we could desire to see completed ; yet I could *devoutly* wish, that the monies sunk in procuring the *chaotic* productions of nature, with her *rudeſt* stores, and monstrous *deformities*, had been expended in obtaining pieces, in which her *comeliest* proportions are best imitated, and the perfection of her works breathe anew, in the speaking *canvass* or animated *marble*.

And

And I entertain the pleasing hopes, that by your endeavours, Gentlemen, either your society will encrease in its *riches*, or be adorned with *such* members, as shall enable it, from a noble emulation, and generous design, to establish some school, which shall be a public honor, and utility: to which artists may resort to study the best pieces which your judgment, and care may procure.

Before I finish my letter, which if I were to review, would appear I suppose very unconnected, and trifling, considering the importance of the subject of it (on which account I here take an opportunity

E of

of making an apology.) I beg leave to *recur* to the introduction, which has indeed insensibly lead me into my cursory observations.

I must, gentlemen, call off your attention, if I have been able at all to confine it to artists of superior skill, from these; and beg you to look, with a propitious regard upon those, who *have* sought, or *may* sollicit your future patronage, or reward.

I mean no reflection upon your society but in the venerable name of Arts, and Sciences, *depress* not by *contempt*, the rising attempts of

of any genius: make not your own well formed judgments, and improved taste, a standard, to which if a piece does not reach, it shall be *rejected*.

Consider in *your* late exhibition, whether there was not a piece, not many more degrees beneath the perfection of that, to which the premium of a hundred guineas was adjudged, than that was inferior to the idea of perfection which every gentleman had conceived; and then determine, by *what principle of distribution*, the *one* was *rewarded*, and the *other* went *empty* away.

Think what every artist feels from hopes of the proposed premium ; from a certain partiality we always entertain towards our own productions ; as well as a desire of the applause of your honourable society ; and then judge, whether he must not feel a sufficient disappointment, and pain upon a *total* rejection ; without the additional pang of having his piece cruelly handled, for faults which *never* existed in it.

I know not the *artist*. I feel for him as a *man*. And I do, without the least partiality (even that which *pity* itself always entertains

tains on the side of the *injured*, or *unfortunate*) think, that the artist, is not of an *unpromising* genius; and *may* improve in his art, especially in character, and the sentiment of passion.

I wish, gentlemen, your laudable designs, all possible success; your generous endeavours, all possible encouragement. May Arts, and Science, Commerce, and Manufactures flourish, and encrease under your protection, and influence: and may each member unite, to support in all its credit, and reputation, your society, which is of the *highest* importance, when  
con-

considered in the light, of refining  
the manners of men, by introducing,  
and cultivating the politer arts,  
which embellish, and adorn human  
life ; and which are its external or-  
naments, and perfection.

I am, Gentlemen,

with all possible esteem,

and *decent* reverence,

Your most humble servant,

The A U T H O R.



